DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 432 538 SP 038 650

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TITLE Students' Reactions to the New Curriculum for English Instruction.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Teacher Education (3rd, Doar Beit Berl, Israel, June 27-July 1, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; Curriculum Development; Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *National Curriculum; Preservice Teacher Education; Second Language Instruction; *Student Attitudes; *Student Teachers; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Israel

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the reactions of student teachers to Israel's New Curriculum in English as proposed by the Ministry of Education. The New Curriculum is based on a change in basic assumptions about the nature of foreign language teaching and English instruction in Israeli schools. Students were asked to write their initial reactions and their present reactions after dealing with the New Curriculum in pedagogy class for a semester. Many students initially reacted with shock and anxiety, considering it very different from how they were taught. They saw the organization of the curriculum into new domains as theoretical and not relevant to the classroom. They felt this new way of viewing English would be hard to adjust to. A few saw the New Curriculum as progressive. Activities designed to teach the New Curriculum were based on domains suggested by the Ministry of Education, including access to information, social interaction, presentation of group activities, and appreciation of literature. Most students' feelings about the New Curriculum changed after participating in the class. They felt it opened their minds to new ideas and opinions and was a change for the better. They could now see the associations, connections, and bridges between different domains. They saw application of the New Curriculum as having advantages for teachers and students. A few still viewed the change as difficult, problematic, and unclear. (SM)

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Students' Reactions to the New Curriculum for English Instruction

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Students' Reactions to the New Curriculum for English Instruction

The New Curriculum has posed challenges for student teachers and teacher-trainers alike in terms of a "perspective transformation" (Mezirow, 1991) in the ways we are accustomed to thinking about language learning and instruction. The need to reflect upon and transform personal beliefs can be accomplished in an atmosphere of peer support. Tools for analysis and reorganization of language concepts are presented here in an experiential learning model for the pedagogy classroom.

The New Curriculum is based on a change in basic assumptions about the nature of foreign language teaching in general and the instruction of English in the Israeli school system in particular. As is clearly stated in the introduction to the New Curriculum, pupils today have a wide and ever-growing access to the English language in their personal lives before they encounter English in the classroom, which is usually not before 4th grade. For this reason, it is now incumbent upon the teacher to gain awareness of the pupils already-existing body of knowledge and use it as a basis for further instruction. This approach coordinates nicely with the ideas of progressive education today: pupil-centered learning, sensitivity to different learning styles and awareness of the multicultural backgrounds of the pupils. Teachers who have attempted to ignore these realities in the heterogeneous Israeli classroom have, undoubtedly, encountered many difficulties. However, known difficulties often seem preferable to unknown possibilities. The new curriculum has forced upon teachers a "perspective transformation" (Mezirow, 1991), which is triggered by the individual's realization that one's beliefs or assumptions no longer work well in the specific life situation in which one finds oneself in a rapidly changing social world. Whether this has come about due to awareness of the changing nature of the Israeli pupil and classroom or due to the demands of the New Curriculum is irrelevant. What is of significance is the potential for personal growth and professional development inherent in the new situation we face today.

Watching my students deal with the new curriculum has been a wonderful learning experience for me. I am used to being well-prepared, knowing what I intend to teach and how. Experience has given me a bag of tools which comes to my aid in unexpected learning situations. I feel confident enough at this stage of the game to be flexible enough to use these tools at a moments' notice. However, the new curriculum as subject for my pedagogy course has challenged all this. I was not prepared for the students' reactions to the New Curriculum in English as proposed by the Ministry of Education. Many of my students reacted with anxiety to the New Curriculum. I realized that meaningful learning would involve more than a cognitive understanding of the domains, standards and benchmarks proposed in the curriculum guidelines. Only an experiential way of learning could challenge habitual ways of thinking and support the individual learners in their formulation of new ways of teaching to replace the old.

Almost all the students (including the teachers-in training and adult learners retraining to be teachers) came into contact with the New Curriculum for the first time as it was presented in the pedagogy course this year. Initial reactions to the domains of English teaching and learning are insightful to us as educators, both on a professional and on a personal level. For this reason, the students were asked to write down their initial reactions in retrospect and their present reactions to the New Curriculum after dealing with it in pedagogy class for a semester. Although the reactions were varied, major themes can be found running throughout the individual entries. I will try to organize these reactions in the students' own words and phrases:

Initial Reactions

1. Feelings

The initial reaction to the domains was one of "surprise" and "shock." Words which were repeated again and again in individual entries included "anxiety, apprehension, confusing,

frightening, and uncomfortable." Many wrote that they "knew nothing about it" and had "no ideas." One insightful comment was that "it's totally different from the way we were taught."

2. The Domains

The organization of the curriculum into new domains was seen as "theoretical" and not relevant to the classroom. Words that were repeated to describe this included "bombastic, vague, abstract, 'big words,' unclear, unfamiliar and confusing." The domains were seen as unrelated and arbitrary, having "no connection to each other." One student wrote, "I could not grasp the whole."

3. Practical Implications

The general conclusion was that this "totally new" way of looking at English would be "hard to get used to." Many wrote that it is "hard to change" both themselves and the school environment. "Unclear expectations of us" were seen as the source of "being pressured." One metaphor used may sum up the general reaction as "a big question mark!"

The minority opinion, however, was described as "a positive shock" and "an opportunity to enter into a new experience." They saw the curriculum as "progressive" and even "a breath of fresh air!" One wrote, "It's about time something changed!"

Since it is intended that Pedagogy class will serve as a learning model for student teaching on all levels, activities designed to teach the New Curriculum were based on the domains as suggested by the English Inspectorate of the Ministry of Education :

1. Access to information. Under the excellent supervision of our college librarians, the class as a whole participated in a guidance session in which a variety of bibliographical sources of information were presented. Each student was then assigned a specific domain and

requested to find one academic article relevant to the domain. Although the students complained that they really weren't sure what kind of information was pertinent to their specific domains, by the end of the period, articles were found by all. Despite the fact that the assignment was an individual task, much interaction arose naturally among the pupils: they exchanged articles, helped each other find ways to complete the search and shared ideas about the possible meanings of the domains. The librarian who remained on call throughout the 3-hour exercise in the library was rewarded by the class a week later with a letter of appreciation signed by all the students.

2. Social Interaction. In the following lesson, the students were divided into groups according to the domains they were previously assigned. Through discussion based on their own ideas and on the bibliographical articles, they were required to map the group domain in accordance with the principles of concept instruction (DeCecco, 1974; Bruner, 1956) previously learned. Concept instruction can be described as an analytic framework for defining the main concept of a body of subject matter, the sub-categories, the specific cases or examples pertaining to each category and the relations existing between the different parts. Concept instruction can aid the students in analyzing what is necessary to teach in order to convey to the pupils the whole idea and its parts. Concept mapping further serves to illustrate to the students the parts and interrelationships of the parts to each other and to the whole which are often not clearly formulated by them. Concept analysis is a subjective, associative, intuitive and cognitive exercise in which the final product is dependent upon the individual or group of individuals, the subject matter to be analyzed and the specific time and situation in which it is performed. In short, there is no one "correct" way to analyze subject matter into concepts. The group members must reach some sort of compromise concerning their final map. Although the content of this exercise was of an academic nature, the exchange of beliefs and feelings about teaching among the group participants resulted in social interaction on a

personally meaningful level. This exercise resulted in much interaction between the students as they began to realize that cooperation and compromise were necessary to complete the task. The abilities to communicate clearly by suiting language to purpose and to listen openly to ideas of the other group members were skills practiced, as by-products of this exercise.

3. Presentation. Presentation of the group mappings as posters, feedback from the class and reflection on the group mappings according to the instructions given in Deshler (1990), as a critical learning method for adult education, were carried out. The feedback session in which the entire class participated included not only questions, suggestions and comments from class members, but the realization that many categories chosen by one group as part of their domain could be placed in other domains. In this way, the interrelationship of the different domains became apparent. After the groups reconvened to make final changes in their mappings in light of students' comments, many students expressed their desire to receive a copy of the other groups' domains in order to see the "whole picture" and the interrelationships between the domains. This request arose out of the realization that practical application in the classroom could be assisted by an analysis of the New Curriculum into its different domains and the relations existing between them.

4. Appreciation of Language and Literature. "Jabberwocky" was used as an example of teaching reading comprehension in context. The main concepts were outlined according to 2 articles by Carroll (1964, 1967) that were previously assigned as homework. Since these articles are also based on concept instruction having to do specifically with language, the differences between words, meanings and concepts were illustrated. For example, word lists out of context were likened to nonsense syllables, whereas nonsense words in the poem became meaningful through word order, grammatical structure, associations with similar words and sounds of words. The emotional reactions that the poem evoked were discussed and the cleverness of Lewis Carroll was appreciated.

We are now doing group work in order to design lesson plans which are suitable to the subject matter being taught to heterogeneous classes in the different grade levels with existing textbooks. It is still not so easy, but the students' are enthusiastic and inspired to succeed.

After a semester of activities designed to enable the students to work with the new domains, the reactions changed dramatically:

Present Reactions

1. Feelings

The New Curriculum "opened my mind to new ideas and opinions." "It's a change for the better." Many realized that "every method is individual to each teacher" and, therefore, there is a greater possibility of "creativity" for both the teachers and the students.

2. The Domains

The return of stability was expressed by "the domains have been brought down to earth." The students could now see the "associations, connections and bridges between the different domains." They saw them as "overlapping," "with no final end or beginning." The metaphors used for the domains emphasized that "one thing can be related to the other." Two metaphors were "like a circle" and "like a pyramid."

3. Practical Implications

Application of the New Curriculum was now seen as having advantages for both the teacher and the pupils. For the teacher, "Each domain is like a door to a very interesting world of ways to teach English." For the pupils, it is an "authentic" way to learn since " it allows for pupils to find their own interests in English (communication, literature, etc.)." Classroom instruction was seen as based on "things taken from the real world of the child." One student wrote that "it is a utopian wishful thinking which is starting to come true."

On this last note, it is instructive to look at the minority reactions, which give a picture of the problems to be surmounted in the implementation of the New Curriculum in the school system:

1. Not every individual is open to change. "My thinking and feeling about it hasn't changed. It's still unclear."

2. Not every teacher feels capable of taking responsibility for individual ways of teaching. "I wish there were examples and detailed guidelines." "I would like a one-to-one comparison with the old ways."

3. Not every teacher feels empowered enough to take a stand against the norms of the school environment. "My opinion hasn't changed because you have to change the whole school system." "There are problems with experienced teachers who are used to the old ways." "There are problems with the books."

Some of the student-teachers have already encountered difficulties in attempting to implement creative ways of teaching in their field-work under the supervision of experienced teachers. Although this is not a new problem for teacher-trainers, we must be aware of the difficulties our students encounter and find ways of supporting them on both a professional and a personal level. Sprinthall summarized the massive failure of school reforms in America to be due to the "hidden agenda of the classroom," which is dependent upon teacher attitudes, conceptions of self, and intellectual and interpersonal dispositions" (Sprinthall, 1996, p. 666).

It is hoped that the teaching methods outlined above are a step towards student participation in formulating curriculum in an atmosphere of an experiential learning community acting in a reflective mode on both the external and the "hidden" agenda of the classroom.

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